

Eternal Security

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The Eternal Security of the Believer in our Lord Jesus Christ

I shall not simply be giving my own view of the text and then adding comment on the Scriptures which I have been asked to address; I shall be giving my own view and, from time to time in the process, giving my answers to those Scriptures.

But, first of all, we should be careful, it seems to me, to define for ourselves where exactly the problems lie. Actually, every true Christian believes in the eternal security of the believer in our Lord Jesus Christ. I say that without fear of contradiction: every true believer must believe in it because holy Scripture, many times over, asserts the eternal security of the believer. To go no further than that famous verse so often quoted, John 3:16, we find it there said,

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

It is the whole purpose of God's work of salvation that the believer in Jesus Christ our Lord should not perish, but have eternal life.

1. Can a believer be sure that he or she will endure to the end?

The real issue, then, is not whether the believer is eternally secure or not. Rather it is this: can a believer be sure that, once he has believed, he will always remain a believer, that he will endure as a believer, and that he will endure as a believer all the way through to the end?

For, you see, while he remains a believer, then many Scriptures assure him that he that believes has eternal life. On the other hand, if it is possible for him to lose his faith, to cease to be a believer, then, of course, there is no Scripture in the whole of the Bible that will assert that a person will be eternally secure whether he or she is a believer or not.

So then the issue before us is, very simply, once a person has turned to Christ, can he be sure that he will go on believing and thus be eternally secure? The first thing we have to do then, in answer to this question, is surely to look at what Scripture says about this matter of endurance; particularly endurance as related to faith.

Examples from Scripture

Luke 8:4–15. One famous place where the matter is dealt with is in the parable of the Sower. As we all know, our Lord said that, when the seed of the word is sown, there are four results that come from it. I wish to emphasise that the only result that is any good whatsoever is the fourth of those results—those who, 'hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience' (v. 15). That last word translated into English Bibles as 'patience' represents the Greek word for endurance, the word that is now at the centre of our investigation.

Matthew 24:13: 'The one who endures to the end will be saved.' We have often heard these words of our Lord Jesus quoted in this connection. Well, here you have the word 'endure': 'Those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with endurance.'

I want to repeat that a careful scrutiny of our Lord's parable will show that this is the only result of any use whatsoever. None of the others is any good at all; though sometimes you may hear it said that the seed that falls upon the rock and grows up, but then withers in the day of temptation, represents true believers who, at the beginning, *believe* but then perish in the time of persecution—or at least their faith perishes and they give up profession of Christianity.

But let me point out to you what our Lord's verdict is on these people who are represented by the seed which is sown on the rock. He gives us the reason why they wither. It is because they have no root; that is, the word of God has never taken root in their hearts. It may have germinated, or sprouted, if you like, in their mind, and to that extent it is different from the seed that fell on the hard ground and was taken away by the devil before it had time to germinate at all. But we are told that this seed never took any root in the hearts of those who heard it. And I personally judge it to be quite mistaken to call a man a *Christian* in whose heart God's word has never taken root.

John 2:23–25. Well, perhaps you will say to yourself, 'What kind of people are these who can be said to have received the word for a time, in whom it appeared to grow and flourish, and then withered because it had no root?' I suggest we may find here an example:

When he [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

So here is a group of people who, so we are told, when they saw our Lord's signs, *believed*; but obviously not in any satisfactory way because our Lord was not prepared to commit himself to them. He knew what was in them; he knew the real state of their hearts. I suppose they had believed in some shallow sense, but our Lord could see that this was not that solid, permanent kind of believing that alone marks the true believer.

Acts 8:13. Here we read of the gospel being preached to the Samaritans and a number of them believed. And what is more, there was a magician, a sorcerer:

Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

So there we have it quite plainly in Scripture that he *believed*. But subsequently, when Peter came down from Jerusalem and laid his hand on some of the Samaritans, and in consequence God gave the Samaritans his Holy Spirit, Simon offered Peter money in order to persuade

Peter to give him this power, so that he should be able to lay hands on whomsoever he wished and they would receive the Holy Spirit. Peter turned around to Simon and said, 'I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity' (v. 23). So Simon was not a true believer after all.

John 8:31–32. Let's take one more example of this kind of thing. We are told that as our Lord said certain things many believed on him. Then we read,

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'

At which statement these Jews—whom we have just been told *believed* on the Lord Jesus—began to object very seriously and fundamentally, and not many minutes later Jesus was saying to them, 'You are of your father the devil' (v. 44).

I have quoted these examples to show that the New Testament recognises that there is a sense in which people, hearing the word of God, can in a way believe. But it is not a genuine and deep-rooted belief that alone brings a man into a relationship with God and secures him eternal life; it is a fallacy. It has no root; it has not performed in the man the new birth and, in consequence, that kind of belief withers away.

So then, as our Lord tells us, the only kind of belief that is of any use is the belief that leads a man with patience—with *endurance*, to bring forth good fruit, because he has root in himself.

An explanation of some Bible terms in connection with endurance

But if that is so, what can Scripture tell us about our basic question? If our eternal security depends on our continuing to believe, is it possible that the person who has believed in the true sense—the man who has root in himself—should one of these days lose his faith and therefore lose his eternal security?

What does Paul say?

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Rom 5:1–2)

Rejoice. Let me pause for a moment to explain what that word *rejoice* means. It represents a Greek word that does not indicate rejoicing in the sense of joy and bubbling over with lovely feelings of happiness. It is rather a word that expresses deep-lying *confidence*, exultation, which then results in 'hope of the glory of God'.

Hope. Let me point out what the New Testament means by the word *hope*. When we use the word 'hope', we frequently attach to it a very uncertain meaning. We say, 'We hope it will be fine weather on our holiday', and normally we mean, 'We've got a very uncomfortable feeling that it won't be good weather on our holiday.'

That is not how the New Testament uses this word 'hope' of a Christian's expectation. It is rather our English word *expect* or *expectation*: 'We confidently rejoice in expectation, in waiting for the glory of God.'

2. Does it all depend upon a person believing?

You say, 'How can that possibly be?'

The verses are a solid proof of it. Once a man has believed he is *justified* and, therefore, he immediately has peace with God.

Secondly, this introduces him into a sphere of *grace*: 'We have had access into this grace wherein we stand.' That is to say, when a man is justified, he is not then introduced into a situation where God says, 'Very good. You have been justified, but now I must put you on trial and see whether at last you will come up to my standards, and if you don't come up to my standards I shall have to turn you out once again.'

The man is not introduced into a situation of legal condition; he is introduced into a situation of grace. His standing is altogether of grace. And not only has he this present standing, but he has, as Paul said, this 'certain *expectation* of attainment of the glory of God.' All this, because he has initially believed.

But now here comes the rut. Is this justification, this standing in grace, with certain expectation of attaining the glory of God—is this all dependent upon the man believing? What would happen if tribulation came along that broke his faith?

Well then, all would be lost, most certainly. I repeat, God makes no promises to unbelief. We cannot say, 'He who believes on the Son has everlasting life and he that has ceased to believe on the Son still has everlasting life, notwithstanding he has ceased to believe.' So that if some tribulation could arise that broke this man's faith, all certainly would be lost. And yet here is Paul saying that we may confidently rejoice, *boast*, not only in our expectations of attaining the glory of God, but even in our suffering and tribulation. And we may find this out because of these texts that God wishes us to know.

'More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance' (v. 3). Many English translations use the word, *patience*. But once more, the Greek word here is the word that in our other passages has been translated *endurance*. It is not patience, as distinct from *impatience*, but endurance continuously, instead of losing all and giving up.

We can therefore face tribulation confidently, and even rejoice in it, though, of course, while the sufferings last we are not rejoicing in the sense of feeling very happy and joyful, but fearfully and decidedly exultant. The reason why we can do this is because we are to know that, where there is faith, all that tribulation can do is to work endurance. Paul goes on to say, 'endurance produces character' (v. 4). The fact that a person endures marks him or her out as a genuine believer.

And you will remember that this is exactly what our Lord was saying in the parable. Which is the good seed? Well, the good seed, when it is sown, sprouts up, of course. But, because it is also putting down its root and has a roothold, when the heat of persecution arises it continues growing and, with endurance, brings forth fruit. So, where there is faith, we are to know that tribulation works endurance, and that endurance marks a person out as genuine.

What does Peter say?

Here for us is a practical example; an example, doubtless, that was meant to be typical. Peter, after all, was the first to confess Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and his conversion, like Paul's, is in a way an example held out to the rest of us. It is common knowledge that at a certain stage in his spiritual experience Peter denied our Lord. Had you been present in the high priest's court when Peter was standing there, using all the swear words he knew to convince everybody that he was not a believer, you would certainly have had many questions in your mind about where Peter really stood in relation to Christ.

Had he given up his *faith*? As far as you could have told from his lips and his behaviour at the moment, yes, he had given up his faith. Certainly, he had given up the *confession* of his faith. But now let us notice an important distinction; it will serve us in good stead when we come later to consider another part of the New Testament.

The Lord Jesus prayed that Peter's faith would not fail

There is an exceedingly important distinction between our faith, on the one hand, and our confession of faith on the other. Under the fear of suffering, Peter gave up the confession of his faith, but we have our Lord's own statement for it that Peter did not *lose* his faith. Before Satan was allowed to attack the eleven disciples, and Peter in particular, our Lord said this to Simon: 'I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22:32).

Peter's faith, then, did not fail. We know it from the subsequent history. He did turn again and, incidentally, he did establish his brothers. But we might have known it from our Lord's own words before the whole trial started: 'I have prayed for you that your faith should not fail.' We may take it as axiomatic because if our Lord prays for anything, then that thing is always granted. Our Lord set himself to pray for Peter's faith that it should not fail. Then we might immediately be certain that that faith would not fail, and we have the evidence that it did not fail.

Our Lord adds that, when once Peter was turned again, he was to establish his brothers. Establish them how? Well, doubtless, in many different ways, but surely in particular he was to establish them as they too faced tribulation and fear of suffering. He would establish them as the Lord had encouraged him. Come what tribulation there might, their faith would be maintained by the intercessions of Christ. We shall proceed in a moment to the Epistle to the Hebrews where we shall see at length this matter of our Lord's intercessions.

The Lord did not pray for Judas Iscariot

But first, let us briefly think about another of the apostles. His name was Judas. He too suffered an attack of Satan. Indeed, Satan eventually entered into him. He was tempted by the love of money, perhaps also by the love of position. It is to be noted that he was eternally lost. It is also to be noted that our Lord never prayed for Judas. Why was that? Is it that our Lord discriminates between believers? Does he pray for some believers that their faith shall not fail and then decline to pray for other believers so that they find, when their faith is tested, that it does fail? Well, that is impossible, surely, to think that our Lord should thus discriminate between believers. The answer to the problem is simply this: that Judas, for all his apostleship,

for all his preaching, for all his casting out demons in the name of Christ, for all that he was the treasurer of the apostolic band, was never a believer.

We should notice that it was not the case that Judas originally and initially believed and then, under stress, ceased to believe. At the time of his appointment, our Lord indicated it to them out loud, 'Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil' (John 6:70). Judas was a 'son of perdition', as our Lord called him (17:12 KJV). When our Lord stood at the end of his ministry to give account to the Father for those men whom the Father had entrusted into his hand during his lifetime, he said this, 'Of all that you have given me, I have lost not one except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.'

He prays for every believer

I am, therefore, going to argue that as our Lord prayed for Peter, so he does for every believer who has put his or her faith in him. I rest my confidence on Hebrews 7, in which our Lord's ministry as our great high priest is described in detail.

We are told that our Lord's priesthood is infinitely superior to that of Aaron, and in particular:

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Heb 7:23–25)

That is sufficient for me to indicate that our Lord intercedes for us, that is, for all who trust him. Presumably, therefore, among the other many topics of his intercession there is this primarily: he will intercede for us that our faith shall not fail. If it failed, he would not be able to save us to the uttermost, or even save us at all. Therefore, the fact that he lives to save us to the uttermost indicates that, by his interceding, he guarantees that our faith shall not fail.

3. Verses in the Epistle to the Hebrews that cause a difficulty for some

But now we have arrived at the Epistle to the Hebrews, and perhaps we had better stay with it for a while. For from this epistle comes a whole series of verses which perhaps are the verses, beyond all others in the New Testament, that have made Christians doubt their eternal security.

1. 'How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?' (2:3)

We are told, for instance, that the people to whom this letter was written were Christians. They had certainly been converted. Therefore, when the writer warns them in these terms, his warning is to be understood in this sense: *we Christians*—we who have believed, and at the moment are still believing—how shall *we* escape if we [believers] neglect this great salvation?

2. 'For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgement' (10:26).

They are told again that when the writer talks here about people sinning wilfully, he is referring to genuine believers. And it is argued that because the writer uses the pronoun 'we',

he means to indicate that, if *we Christians*—we genuine believers, born again children of God—if *we sin deliberately*, there's nothing for it but a certain expectation of fiery judgment.

Those arguments are quite mistaken and false. We know that, in the first place, because of what the writer himself tells us about the people to whom he was originally writing this letter.

Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. (6:9)

He is saying to them, 'We are speaking as though there is no evidence in your life of true salvation at all—but, although we are speaking like that, in our hearts we are persuaded better things of you.'

We must, of course, accept what the writer says about his attitude to these people, for he knew his own attitude. He is writing this letter to these people as though they were not believers; as though, at least, there was no evidence that they were believers; as though they were completely lacking evidence of salvation. Nevertheless, in his heart, he is convinced that they are believers and there is evidence of salvation. Or at least there was, for in the verses that follow in chapter 6 he details the evidence that there used to be in their lives that they were genuine believers and manifested the truth of salvation.

4. Can a Christian have periods of unbelief and disobedience?

Analogy 1

We may know this again from the large and detailed analogy that the writer draws between the people to whom he was writing and their forefathers in ancient time.

In chapters 3 and 4 he reminds these people of what happened to their fathers after they had left Egypt with Moses and were crossing the Sinai desert on their way to the promised land. The great point of the analogy is this: having come out of Egypt with Moses and having got a part of the way across the dessert, they failed to enter into the promised land.

Why? Was it because they were genuine believers but, having got so far under the pressure of the wilderness, they gave up their faith and ceased to be believers? Why didn't they get in?

'So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief' (3:19). This summarises the Holy Spirit's diagnosis: it was 'because of unbelief'.

But somebody will say, 'Are not real, true, genuine believers told that at times they will give way to bouts of unbelief?'

In one sense, yes, obviously they will.

Analogy 2

May we recur to Peter himself on the night he was crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat. The Lord approached, walking on the wave, and Peter, in a moment of special faith, asked permission to get out of the boat and walk on the water to go to Jesus. Christ gave him permission, but halfway between the boat and our Lord Peter began to look around and saw the wind and the waves. Beginning to sink, he cried, 'Lord, save me' (Matt 14:30).

The Lord eventually rebuked him for his lack of faith. But do please notice that, when a believer like Peter temporarily loses faith in some aspect of his Christian pathway, our Lord

does not let him go and he perishes. Peter, at heart and fundamentally, was a true believer. When momentarily he lost faith in our Lord's ability to make him walk on the water and he began to sink, far from pushing him down with his foot and denouncing him as a wicked renegade, our Lord grasped his hand, picked him up and carried him to the boat.

Is it not possible for all believers to be disobedient at times?

And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? (Heb 3:18)

That again is certainly true. But if this verse means that, if ever a believer is disobedient, he will fail to get into the great rest of God—he will fail to enter God's heaven—then I'm afraid there isn't a believer that has ever lived that will turn up in heaven, for, says James, 'We all stumble in many ways' (3:2).

To conclude that no believer will ever enter heaven because, at some time or other, every believer has been disobedient, is so absurd that we must look around this passage to see how the writer himself is using the terms of *disobedience* and *unbelief*.

He tells us, of course, in the verses that immediately follow:

Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left *us* of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was *the gospel* preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard *it*. (Heb 4:1–2 KJV)

That term, 'the gospel', in some translations that you are using may simply be 'good tidings' or 'good news'. However, it is the word that is normally used throughout the Greek New Testament for 'the gospel'. These people were *evangelised*. They had the gospel preached to them, as we have had the gospel preached to us, but hearing the word did not profit them. Why didn't this word of the gospel profit them? Because, as the verse explains, they were not believers—they did not believe.

But then, what was it they didn't believe? The verse has told us: they did not believe *the gospel*. In other words, this writer is not saying that there are some believers in the gospel that may eventually cease to believe and, therefore, fail to get into God's heaven. He is saying that there are some people who, outwardly, start out on the pathway of faith, but their subsequent behaviour shows that they never believed the gospel, even from the start.

What message did Moses bring to the Israelites when they were in Egypt?

Let's think back for a moment into history, about this time of which the writer is speaking. Moses came to the Israelites in Egypt with a glorious gospel message. It was that the God of their fathers had come down to deliver them, to take them out of Egypt and bring them into the promised land.

Now please notice what the gospel was, and what it wasn't. Moses did not preach the gospel in the manner of some more modern times in tales like this:

'My brothers, the main thing is to get out of Egypt; the main thing is to secure yourself from the judgments of God that are to fall on Egypt. Let's get that settled first—let's get out

into the comparative security of the wilderness. And then, if you wish to take things further, you may elect to go in for the deluxe edition of God's salvation, which has some optional courses. For instance, you might consider taking it further and even going on into the promised land. But even if you don't, the main thing is that you get out of Egypt.'

There is no such gospel. There was no such gospel then and there is no such gospel now. The gospel is one single package, one indivisible whole—you take the lot or you take nothing. The gospel that Moses preached was that God had come down to deliver them out of Egypt and to bring them into Canaan.

And what happened? The people professed to believe the first bit: they left Egypt and started to cross the desert. But, on a couple of occasions at least, they showed their true colours. They refused to enter the promised land, proposed to make themselves another captain and return to Egypt. People who thus refused to enter the promised land demonstrated that they had not accepted the gospel as originally preached.

The term 'disobedient', as it is used in the New Testament

Allow me to remind you of a couple of places where this particular term, or rather the particular Greek word in Hebrews 3:18, is used elsewhere in the New Testament.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. (John 3:36)

We shall at once perceive that that verse knows only two classes of people. There is the believer on the one hand, the disobedient on the other. Not three classes: the believer who is obedient, the believer who is disobedient, and then the unconverted. Simply, 'Whoever believes'; or 'whoever does not obey'.

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. (Acts 19:8-9)

Now, let's ask ourselves who these people were that were hardened and disobedient. Were they genuine believers that somehow or other had subsequently fallen? Well, of course not. Paul is here entering the Jewish synagogues, reasoning the gospel. Some believed and became disciples; but others in that synagogue, having heard the gospel now many times, became hardened by that same gospel, and were disobedient.

They are those, of course, of whom the verse in John has been talking. They 'shall not see life', they have disobeyed the gospel. The gospel, as Paul elsewhere stated it, is made known for 'the obedience of faith' (Rom 16:26). God, indeed, 'commands all people everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30); and not to believe and not to repent is, of course, the most basic disobedience.

Or, again, we may take the phrase that Jude uses when he, in turn, describes who they were that perished in the wilderness at Sinai in the time of Moses:

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterwards destroyed those who did not believe. (Jude v. 5)

Applying the lessons of Hebrews

When the gospel is preached in our day, as in olden times, the result is generally a mixture. There are some who, being like the good seed, receive the word. It takes root in them, they bring forth fruit with endurance and they do endure to the end. They endure, not because they personally have special strength above every other person; they endure because, being believers, however weak their belief, Christ is their high priest. He intercedes for them, that their faith shall not fail. In consequence, it does not fail and they endure to the end.

But there are others, when the gospel is preached, who take no notice of it right from the very start. It goes in the proverbial one ear and out the other. There are folks in between who, when the gospel is preached, not only receive it with joy, they profess faith—like the mixed multitude that came up out of Egypt.

Superficially, you would not be able to see immediately if they were true and genuine believers. They go along with the true believers, but they never become united by faith with them that heard (Heb 4:2). And because they had no root in them, as the Saviour said, when their apparent belief was subjected to the strain of real life it disappeared, because it was never genuine belief. There was never any root (Matt 13:6).

5. What about the 'warning' passages in the Epistle to the Hebrews?

But here I must turn to some of the objections that you will be waiting to advance against me, particularly those objections that are based on the famous *warning* passages in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

There is one very solemn warning in chapter 6 and another in chapter 10. These two passages in particular have caused many students of the word of God to feel quite sure that Scripture does teach that it is possible for a person to genuinely believe the Saviour, to be born again, to receive the Holy Spirit, to have eternal life, and yet subsequently to fall away and to sin in such fashion as to be eternally lost.

1. Chapter 10 verse 26

It is to those Scriptures, then, that we turn, and I choose to deal with the one in chapter 10 first.

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. (v. 26)

I would like to emphasise very heavily that in expounding holy Scripture it is important that we keep to what Scripture itself exactly says. This Scripture, for instance, is often quoted by people who say, 'Hebrews 10 tells us that it is possible for a believer, if he sins wilfully *after he has been saved*, to fall away and be lost.'

Actually, of course, the verse says no such thing.

Notice first the phrase, *'after receiving the knowledge of the truth'*. On the face of it, isn't that salvation? Surely, it's salvation? But I must insist that we do not treat holy Scripture so loosely. The writer does not say, *'after we are saved'*, but *'after we have received the knowledge of the truth'*. It is the fact that the Greek word indicates *'close knowledge'*, but, even so, close knowledge of the truth is not, I must insist, the same thing as being saved.

An illustration from the experience of the Apostle Paul

Paul tells us of his own conversion: how bad he was before and how God showed him mercy.

Though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief. (1 Tim 1:13)

That is, he persecuted the Christians, he blasphemed, he opposed the Lord Jesus, but he obtained mercy because he did it in ignorance. He hadn't got the knowledge of the truth and, therefore, mercy was still open to him. Hebrews is telling us that, if you do that kind of thing after you have received the knowledge of the truth, there is no mercy.

Then you say, *'What makes the difference, then? When he persecuted the Christians and opposed the Lord Jesus, how could Paul say that he did it in ignorance?'*

Did he not know what he was doing?

Well, in one sense, he knew perfectly well what he was doing. He was an intelligent man. If you had stopped him on the morning that he was setting out for Damascus, and said, *'Paul, what are you about to do?'* he would have told you quite bluntly, *'I'm about to go to Damascus to get Christians and wring their necks as hard as I can wring them.'*

'I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth' (Acts 26:9). He knew that was what he was doing.

What does he mean, 'I did it in ignorance'?

Well, quite obviously, he is referring to his state before he was converted—before the Lord Jesus appeared to him in glory on the Damascus road. Then the ignorance was dispelled; then he knew absolutely fully and one hundred per cent that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God. He had, in a word, been *illuminated* by the Holy Spirit.

Now, his being illuminated by the Holy Spirit did not remove from him all possibility of choice. He still might have said, as the Pharisees said before him, that, in spite of the Holy Spirit's evidence, they were not prepared to believe. Paul, fortunately, chose to believe. The difference, then, was this illumination by the Holy Spirit.

Until a man is illuminated, of course, there is no possibility of his *believing* in the true sense of the term; but once a man has been illuminated he still has his choice. And if, after we have received the knowledge of the truth, after we have been *enlightened*, as Hebrews 10:32 describes it, we deliberately reject the gospel then, of course, there is no mercy.

To which particular sin is Hebrews 10:26 referring?

'For if we go on sinning deliberately . . .' What must that mean? Is it not true to say that all believers from time to time in their lives, unfortunately, do things deliberately that they know to be wrong? If this verse means that, if we *believers* ever do anything deliberately that we

know to be wrong, there is no salvation—we lose our eternal life and must be lost for ever—then no believer will ever turn up in heaven at all.

Of course, the words do not necessarily mean that. I submit that the word ‘belief’ is being used in its technical sense as, for instance, it is used by our Lord in John 16:8–9. Talking of the Holy Spirit, our Lord says, ‘And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me’.

Not of sin because they go to the dog races or are unpleasant to their mothers-in-law, but here sin, in the special sense of sin, ‘*because they do not believe in me*’. It is of that sin, I judge, Hebrews 10:26 is talking.

The consequences of continuing to sin deliberately

Many a man remains an unbeliever because he has not received the knowledge of the truth; he has not been illuminated, and for such a man there is mercy. But if a man deliberately sins—deliberately refuses to believe—*after* he has received the knowledge of the truth, *after* he has been illuminated, then there is no mercy.

But then I myself am being inexact, for the verse doesn’t actually say simply ‘there is no mercy’. What it says is this: ‘For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, *there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.*’

God is prepared to save anybody, to forgive anybody, to have mercy on anybody; but mercy must always be just and be founded on a sacrifice. If a person, with eyes fully opened by the Holy Spirit and knowing the truth that Jesus is the Son of God, deliberately rejects the Lord Jesus, then there is no other sacrifice. The verse says, ‘There no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.’

‘You can’t have your cake and eat it’; neither can you reject your cake and still have it. And if, with your eyes open, you reject Christ and his sacrifice, please know that there is no other sacrifice.

‘If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins’. It isn’t a question that God isn’t prepared to have mercy; he can’t have mercy except on the basis of the sacrifice. If we reject the sacrifice he has provided, then there is no question of any mercy.

What is this sin?

Here is a man who has ‘trodden under foot *the Son of God*’. Not accidentally stumbled over the humanity of Jesus, but deliberately trodden under foot the deity of the Lord Jesus.

Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? (v. 29 kjv)

Many a believer sins, in the sense of doing something wrong, and does it deliberately, knowing it to be wrong. But this man is doing something far more serious than that: with his eyes open, he is deliberately denying the deity of Jesus. He has counted the blood of the covenant an *unholy* thing, literally, a *common* thing.

That, of course, follows logically from his first position. If Jesus is not the Son of God, then his blood is common. It is of no more value than any other man's blood, and therefore the covenant that is secured by his blood is not worth the paper it is written on. It is this man's considered opinion—he has *counted*—that the blood of Jesus is common because Jesus was not the Son of God, but just some ordinary sinful man and, therefore, it is his considered opinion that the covenant itself is worthless.

'[He] hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace' — 'has outraged the Spirit of grace' (ESV). Notice, please, it is the Spirit of *grace*. The Holy Spirit is variously described in the New Testament: sometimes the Spirit of holiness, sometimes the Spirit of truth, sometimes the Spirit of God, sometimes the Spirit of Jesus. But here it is the Spirit of grace.

This letter was written to the Hebrews

They were members of the nation who, as a nation, had stood around the cross of Jesus. They had said that he was not the Son of God, his blood was common and they freely spilled it. But at that stage they were doing it in ignorance: they had not yet been enlightened, they had not yet received the full knowledge of the truth.

But on the day of Pentecost God sent forth his Spirit, and in such marked and open form that these same Jews could not deny it. Here was supernatural evidence that God's Spirit had come and this Holy Spirit was witnessing that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and that they had murdered him. But because they had murdered him in ignorance—as the apostle Peter later said, 'I know that you acted in ignorance' (Acts 3:17)—God offered them at Pentecost an opportunity for salvation.

Mark the terms of that salvation

It would have been gracious to have said to those Jews, 'Look here, you have made a ghastly mistake, but this time I'll overlook it and offer you salvation. But, of course, in view of your past, you'll have to work hard for this salvation. And now you'll only have to make one slip and, I'm sorry, I wouldn't be able to forgive anything more.'

It would have been gracious to have given them another chance on those terms, but that isn't what God means by *grace*. The message that the Holy Spirit brought down from heaven was not merely that there was mercy for having murdered the Messiah, but they were being offered salvation totally on the ground of grace, apart from the works of the law. By faith they could be justified, apart from the works of the law.

Now, see a man who has been illuminated, and he turns round and outrages the Spirit of grace. How does he do that? Well, he deliberately denies the deity of the Lord Jesus. He says the whole message of the cross is nonsense, the blood of Jesus is common and sinful. He doesn't believe in the New Testament message of salvation by grace without the works of the law. He doesn't want it or believe it. He is prepared to earn his way to heaven as an ordinary Jew by attempting to keep the law of Moses.

'Well, if you do that,' says God, 'logically, automatically, there is no other sacrifice. If you reject the only one there is, there is nothing but judgment.'

What does it mean, to be 'sanctified'?

But someone is waiting to tell me, 'Look, you have been unfair to the verse because you have omitted the vital phrase. Verse 29 says that he has counted the blood of the covenant *by which he was sanctified* a common thing, and this shows that this man, however apostate now, was once a believer, because he was sanctified.'

But then, that is not necessarily a true deduction. It is possible to be sanctified without being a true believer, is it not?

For one example of that situation I refer you to 1 Corinthians 7 where Paul is talking of a married couple, one partner of whom has become a believer since marriage.

And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is *sanctified* by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is *sanctified* by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. (vv. 13–14 KJV)

It would be impossible to say the unbelieving husband is *justified* in the wife. To be justified you must have personal faith but, in many senses of the word, you can be sanctified without personal faith by coming under the influence, or entering the society of those who are genuine believers.

The mixed multitude that went up out of Egypt, and afterward showed that they had never believed the gospel, did in fact stand at the base of Mount Sinai when the covenant was read, and Moses sprinkled the blood on them, as on all the others. By standing away from Egypt, they were separated from Egypt and joined physically with the people of God.

That didn't secure that they were therefore believers. The Holy Spirit has just told us they weren't believers. They were sprinkled with the blood of the covenant but they never had believed the gospel, even though they had taken their stand away from ungodly Egypt and for a while journeyed with the people of God.

2. Chapter 6 verses 4–6

But somebody again is going to object that Hebrews 6 puts the matter beyond all doubt because of the things said there of these people.

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

Please let us notice once more what these verses say and what they don't say. It is often quoted as though they said, 'If a person has once received the Holy Spirit and been born again, and then he falls away, he cannot thereafter be saved.'

The verses say nothing of the sort. It says that these people cannot be *restored again to repentance*. You cannot make them change their minds. Now, the plain facts of history recorded in the Bible and elsewhere show that, from time to time, many believers have fallen

and then have been brought to repentance. Peter was, as we have already seen. But these people cannot be brought to repentance; you will never get them to change their minds.

Why is that? We are helped by an illustration given at the end of the paragraph.

For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. (vv. 7-8)

The writer envisages two types of land. On one piece of land the rain comes down and produces a crop useful to those for whom it is prepared, reciprocating the blessing of God. Then he asks us to think of another piece of land. The rain comes down upon this land and it produces nothing but thorns and thistles and its crop has to be burned.

What shall we do about that second piece of land?

You say, 'Add some more rain.'

Well, what use would that be? More rain, more thorns.

In the reality of which this illustration is a parable, the rain, of course, is the Holy Spirit; the ground, the human heart. One heart the Holy Spirit illuminates until its possessor knows the truth, and the man says yes to Christ, receives him, is born again and, like the good seed, brings forth fruit with endurance. Another heart, likewise enlightened by the Holy Spirit, perhaps makes a profession of faith, but is not genuine. To use the terminology of our Lord's parable, 'it has no root in itself, and afterwards falls away'.

If such a person has been illuminated by the Holy Spirit, you'll never get him to change his mind. Why not? Well, because God has nothing left with which to get the man to change his mind. If he has been illuminated by the Holy Spirit and he fully and completely knows the truth, not just intellectually but spiritually, because the Holy Spirit has worked directly on his spirit; if he knows as clearly as he will ever know and he then deliberately rejects Christ and rejects the witness of the Holy Spirit, God has nothing left with which to get the man to change his mind.

You say, 'Why can't God do a miracle?'

But what is a miracle compared with the direct operation of the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is God. If, knowingly and finally, you say no to God, there isn't any other person or power left in the universe that can make you change your mind.

A deliberate choice

This is not some believer who has accidentally wandered and fallen into sin, whose mind has been infiltrated by doubts coming from ill health or from Satan, or from ungodly companions. These are people who, we are told, deliberately and personally 'are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt' (v. 6).

You say, 'How could they do that? How could they do it again, and when did they do it the first time?'

We come back to the fact that this letter is written to Jews. Their nation as a nation stood before the cross of Jesus and said, 'Crucify him. His blood be on us and on our children' (Matt 27:25). These people, as Jews, have heard the gospel's call to repentance. As Peter put it on the day of Pentecost, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation' (Acts 2:40). Perhaps they

have outwardly moved over from the Jewish community to the Christian, but now, with their eyes open and knowing that Jesus is the Son of God, they deliberately go back to that Jewish community and personally now do what their nation did as a nation—they personally crucify the Son of God afresh. They say, so to speak, ‘The nation was right in crucifying Jesus and, indeed, if they hadn’t done it, we would have done it.’ They evidently are not believers.

At the moment any person talks like that, God’s verdict on him, as we have seen from chapter 3, is that he never was a believer (v. 19).

They were enlightened but they were not genuine believers

You say, ‘The terms in Hebrews 6 demand that he must have been a believer. Verse 4 says that they were enlightened.’

But, as we have seen, it is possible to be enlightened without believing the light. ‘While you have the light,’ says our Lord, ‘believe in the light, that you may become sons of light’ (John 12:36). It is one thing to have it; it is another thing to believe in it.

But you will say, ‘It is said that they’re not only enlightened, but they’ve “tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come”. Surely, you must be a genuine believer to have shared in the Holy Spirit?’

And I would argue, not necessarily. In what sense, ‘to have shared’? And what, indeed, are these ‘powers of the age to come’?

To understand this, we must refer to chapter 2 of Hebrews:

How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (vv. 3–4)

If you want to know what that means, read the Acts of the Apostles, which records miracles done in the name of the Lord Jesus to authenticate the gospel message to the Jews. We are told, for instance, that as Peter walked down the street his shadow fell on the people, and everyone upon whom his shadow fell was healed of his illness (5:15). It would take a strong faith, wouldn’t it, to believe that everyone upon whom Peter’s shadow fell, and who was thus cured of a physical illness, was immediately *born again* without any personal faith, just because the shadow of Peter fell on them?

No, they were not necessarily born again because they received physical healing by the impress of Peter’s shadow.

What then was the power that so healed them? Peter’s answer would be, ‘Well, this is the power of the Holy Spirit, sent down from heaven in the name of Jesus. The time is coming when God is going to fulfil all that the prophets have ever spoken, and times of restoration shall come. This is a foretaste of it. These are the powers of the age to come.’ (See Acts ch. 3).

And everybody who thus was physically healed or saw the demonstration of a physical healing, or some other miracle, saw it with their own eyes and knew it was supernatural power; they knew it was the power of the Holy Spirit and, to that extent, they had partaken of the Holy Spirit. For if they hadn’t, what had they done? How did they become well?

But partaking of the Holy Spirit so as to receive the full knowledge of the truth, which only the Holy Spirit can give; partaking of the Holy Spirit by being enlightened, which enlightening only the Holy Spirit can perform, is not necessarily the same as *believing* that light, *trusting Christ* and being born again.

The children of Israel had ample evidence of the power of God

The Israelites in Egypt happen to be a good illustration—that’s why the writer of *Hebrews* chose them. They were the beneficiaries of a whole series of supernatural signs in Egypt. Therefore, they were protected. Their houses had light in them when the Egyptians had darkness; there was no plague that fell on them. They had superabundant evidence of the power of God. They went through the Red Sea as though it were dry ground. They saw the miracle of the manna in the wilderness and the quail, and the Holy Spirit says that they never had believed the gospel.

We should remember how far a man can go without being a genuine believer. Our Lord reminds us that in coming days some shall come to him, disputing his decision.

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father which is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you’. (Matt 7:21–23)

Notice that these folks have done all sorts of spiritual miracles, yet our Lord excludes them from his kingdom and they never get in. It isn’t a question of having been in and then being cast out; they never get in. Notice that our Lord doesn’t say to them, ‘I no longer know you’, but rather, ‘I *never* knew you’. They never had been believers.

But you say, ‘They must have been. They’ve done miracles in the name of Christ, and you can’t cast out demons except by the power of the Holy Spirit.’

We must bow to what Christ says. They have done miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit, but that does not prove that they were believers. ‘I never knew you,’ he says.

The great contrast between the true believer and the false professor

At the end of chapter 3 we are told that the Israelites who failed to get in, failed because *they did not believe* (v. 19).

At the beginning of chapter 4 we are told what it was they didn’t believe: they didn’t believe the gospel (v. 2). Then verse 3 says, ‘For *we who have believed* enter that rest’.

This is about the only place I know where the New Testament puts the matter of *belief* into the past. Normally it says, ‘He that *has* eternal life’, but here the writer wants to contrast the true believer with the false professor. The false professor not only doesn’t believe in the present, he never did believe the gospel. Notice the contrast with the man that did believe (it’s an aorist participle in Greek)—‘We who have believed enter that rest’. For, once they have been saved, the high priest’s intercession shall guarantee that their faith is not destroyed

Someone will say, ‘The author constantly, throughout the letter, exhorts them not to cast away their faith. Therefore, if he exhorts them not to cast away their faith, it must be possible to cast away their faith’ (see, for example, 10:35).

But then, if we read the epistle exactly, we shall find that what it is he exhorts them not to cast away is not their faith, but their *confession* of faith, their *confidence* of faith. It does often happen to believers that Satan attacks them. They sin and fall, and then Satan whispers in their ear, 'There you are, you can't be a believer because look how you've fallen.' And these dear folk, because they have been wrongly taught, 'cast away their confidence'. That doesn't mean that their faith has been destroyed.

Peter cast away his confession of faith; he actually denied the Lord. The record stands that he never lost his faith. And what these people are being exhorted to do, if they are believers at all, is not to cast away their confidence and their hope and the confession of their faith.

Somebody will say, 'In chapter 2 it says, "How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?"' (v. 3). They will then add that it is impossible to neglect a thing unless you first possess it. I must say that I have not observed that in true life. It seems to me that there are many things that you can neglect without possessing them.

For instance, my friends may tell me that the doctor down the road has just the right treatment and medicine to cure me of my complaint, but I can neglect that medicine. I can neglect that treatment by never going anywhere near it. I don't have to have the medicine before I neglect it. But, even suppose I had it, having it is not the same thing as taking it. There's many a person who has a three-quarters full bottle of medicine in his medicine cabinet that he ought to have taken to its very last dregs, but hasn't. And some have even been known to satisfy their doctors, by taking the medicine and pouring it down the drain. Having it is not the same as taking it.

Having a Bible in your hand is not the same thing as believing it. Knowing about the Saviour is not the same thing as believing him, and even being enlightened by the Holy Spirit is not the same thing as believing the Saviour.

6. Do people have to change when they become children of God?

And now let us turn to other approaches to this whole matter. I have been arguing hitherto that, once there has been true faith, our Lord's intercessions will guarantee that that faith is never broken, and so long as it is never broken the eternal security of the believer is assured. But we can look at the whole matter from this different angle. Let's think briefly of the nature of the change that is wrought in the believer when he or she becomes a child of God.

There are some changes in life that are reversible. You can make a cold thing hot, and then make it cold again. You can make a dirty thing clean, and then make it dirty again. Is salvation a thing like that?

As a woman put it once, when asked how long she had been saved she replied, 'On and off for forty years.' Is salvation one of those things? You can be lost then saved, then lost again? An answer to this will, in part, depend on what you think about the nature of the *change* that is produced when a person believes Christ and is born again. There are some changes in ordinary life that are irreversible. A virgin getting married, for instance. She can get divorced but she can never become a virgin again.

In conversion, we have what the Scripture describes as a *new birth*. That birth is effected by what the Bible further describes as *God's seed*. Let me read you what John says in the first

Epistle of John 3:9: 'No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.'

It is an irreversible change

When a man is born again, it is not that he is just *reformed*, or even changed: there is a new thing put in him that was never there before. As Paul would put it in 2 Corinthians 5:17, 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.' Not merely a change of the old man, but the implantation of something that is utterly new that wasn't there before. It is a new life, a new creation: it is the very seed of God which, by definition, doesn't and cannot sin. Our old nature certainly goes on sinning, but that new life, that seed of God, cannot sin.

The nature of the change, then, performed in a person at new birth, is, I submit to you, an irreversible change. There is born in him a new life that is the imperishable life of God.

A new life and a new nature

But somebody will say, 'In the second Epistle of Peter, Peter talks of some who surely were believers, but then fell away.'

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. (2 Pet 2:20–21)

But I must just say once more that the verse doesn't say, 'After they were saved; after they were born again,' it simply says, 'After they have known the way of righteousness'. It's not necessarily the same as being saved.

Moreover, Peter now uses an illustration which puts the matter beyond doubt. He says, 'What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to it owns vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire"' (v. 22).

It is, after all, a metaphor, an illustration; but a significant one. For this is the epistle in which Peter tells us in the first chapter that, when we become children of God, we not only get God's life, we get his *nature*. The gospel holds out by its promises the very nature of God (1:4).

The trouble with this sow was that, though it was washed externally, it didn't receive any new nature. Its old nature, therefore, reasserted itself and it went back to wallowing in the mire. The dog, who had got a terrible indigestible lump upon its chest, presently vomited the nasty mass out. But, not having received a different nature and remaining a dog, it inevitably went back to what its nature desired.

Now, both sow and dog were unclean animals to Peter, who was a Jew. The highest insult you could offer a Jew, even an unconverted Jew, was to call him a pig. I submit to you that Peter would never call a fellow believer either a sow or a dog; and certainly not Peter, the man who, as a sheep himself, went astray and got himself in a terrible ditch of mud. But he was rescued by the Lord and cleaned up, and never lost his salvation.

You'll see that there is a vast difference between a pig that has been cleaned, but that's all it is, a pig; and a sheep who has an altogether different nature. Here's the fact: when a man believes Christ, he is not only cleansed externally, he receives new life and a new nature.

May I say in passing, we need to beware of just Christianising people: allowing people to become members of Christian churches before they have had experience of the new birth. We can confuse the issue mightily. If such people that have never had any personal experience of Christ or of the new birth are admitted into churches and then imagine that they have thereby become Christians, well, of course it is possible for 'Christians' of that sort to fall away and be lost. But then the reason for that is that they never were true believers, never born again. Surely it was unkind to them to confuse their minds by letting them think you could be a Christian without personally being born again and receiving the divine nature?

7. How does a believer remain abiding in Christ?

But somebody will add that there is another very powerful Scripture that indicates it is possible for a believer to become severed from Christ and thus eternally lost. Our Lord uses the analogy of a vine with its branches.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.
(John 15:5-6)

'Now,' say some, 'here is a plain statement that it is possible to be in Christ for so long, and then to be cast out and eventually burned. What does that teach, if it doesn't teach it is possible for a believer to fall away and be lost?'

So, let's examine it fully. 'If anyone does not abide in me . . .' says Christ. But, first of all, it's the person that does something: it's the person that fails to abide in Christ. And, as a result of not *abiding*, 'he is thrown away like a branch and withers . . . and [is] burned.' Does that really mean a believer falling from grace and being burned in the lake of fire? If it means that, then obviously the only way to avoid being burned in the lake of fire is to make sure you abide in Christ.

How do you abide in Christ?

What does it mean to abide in Christ? Well, verse 10 tells us, 'If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.' So, in order to abide, I have to keep the commandments, don't I, and if I don't keep the commandments I shall be cut out and placed in hell for ever? That would make salvation depend on my keeping the commandments, would it not, and undermine the whole doctrine of salvation? *The verse cannot mean that.*

Let us look at how carefully our Lord worded verse 6. He is using an illustration, and we must not take it beyond what he intended. 'If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers.' As the lawyers would say, '*qua* branch'. Not as a son, not as a child, not as a sheep, not as a stone in the building, but as a *branch*, he is cast out. Our Lord is thinking

of us as the vehicle of fruit-bearing in this world, people to whom unconverted and converted people may come, plucking the grapes of Christian character and find refreshment—find the character of Christ reproduced.

But if a man does not abide in Christ—if he doesn't keep Christ's commandments, if he doesn't abide in Christ's word, even though he is a believer—he has no power of himself to produce a Godly, Christ-like life. And, therefore, *qua* branch—as a branch, he is thrown away and withers. And who gathers him? It doesn't say 'God', does it? Simply the indefinite 'they'. 'They gather them, and cast them into the fire' (RV).

Christian testimony

I take it that our Lord is talking about what happens to a believer in the world, who fails to abide in the word of Christ and in practical fellowship with Christ. He or she fails to keep Christ's commandments and, having no power of their own, Christian character withers.

The world has very little time for an un-Christ-like Christian; it has no use for him. If it comes to him and finds no grapes, he is nothing different from a man of the world. Therefore, as far as his testimony goes, the world burns it up. There is no use for it so it can sit on the rubbish heap.

For evidence that this is talking about Christian testimony look at the end of the chapter, where our Lord says:

But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. (15:26–27)

8. What if my Christian service is disapproved?

Let us come at the matter now from another point of view, namely the difference between salvation and service. Salvation is a free gift, and not a reward for work well done. For work well done there are rewards, as 1 Corinthians 3 makes very clear. But 1 Corinthians 3 also points out that it is possible for a believer so to live unworthily that when the Lord comes his works are all burnt up. And yet that very same passage tells us that the believer who has lived so unworthily that all his works are burned up, while he shall suffer loss, 'he himself will be saved, but only as through fire' (v. 15).

Somebody will say, 'But in that same epistle of first Corinthians even Paul is in fear of being cast away, and tells us, therefore, that he disciplines himself:

So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (9:26–27)

'There you are,' they say, 'even Paul lived in fear of eventually being cast away.' But first of all, let us notice the context in which he talks. Is he talking of gaining salvation? No, indeed not.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the *prize*? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (vv. 24–25)

He's not talking about salvation. You don't get salvation by running and striving, you get salvation as a gift. You get the crown and the prize, however, by running, by striving, by fighting.

What was it then that Paul was afraid of? Being 'a castaway' (v. 27 KJV). Yes, but the Greek word there, when translated, means 'being disapproved', 'being disqualified'. To use Paul's own metaphor in 2 Timothy 2:5, 'An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.' 'Therefore,' says Paul, 'I discipline myself lest, having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.' Not from salvation, but from receiving the prize at the end of the race. To make salvation depend on our running would once more contradict the whole gospel of grace.

9. Will Christ fulfil the Father's will?

Finally, we may look at the matter from another angle: from the character of Christ.

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:38–40)

He tells us that he came down from heaven to do the will of God. Now, what was that will? God's will, we are told, was that every one that beholds the Son and believes on him should have eternal life, and that Christ should raise such a one up at the last day. Christ came down from heaven to do that will, so that the person who believes in him shall never be lost, but will be raised up at the last day. The question is, therefore, will Christ succeed in doing that will, or will some of those who believe be lost?

Well, the answer is immediate. It is unthinkable that Christ shall fail to do the will of God, for that would make him out to be a sinner. Therefore, he shall perfectly accomplish that will, which is that, 'I should lose nothing of all that he has given me' (v. 39). We may be sure and certain that, of all those that God has given to Christ, Christ will not lose any.

10. How do we make our calling and election sure?

'Ah,' you say, 'that would be all right if you could be sure that you are elect. If you were elect, of course Christ would never lose you. So how can you be sure you are elect? And, indeed, doesn't Peter urge us so to live that we shall make our calling and election sure?'

Yes, he does that. (See 2 Pet 1:10.)

'Well,' you say, 'does that not mean that our election is uncertain? And, therefore, is it uncertain whether we are elect or not, and whether we shall eventually be saved or not?'

Well, if the verse means that, then once more that is an end to the whole doctrine of the gospel of grace. For the way we are to make our calling and election sure, according to Peter, is to add all sorts of Christian virtues to our character in the power of our faith, and if salvation depends in the last analysis on our Christian attainment, we are once more back in the realm of a gospel of works where eventual and final salvation depends altogether on our attainment.

It cannot mean that, and of course it doesn't. We are to make our calling and election sure. The Greek word means 'to confirm it'. Not to confirm it to God, of course, but to confirm it in the sight of other folks—to make it evident. The word is used, for instance, in Philippians, where Paul says he was set for the 'confirmation of the gospel' (1:7). Was the gospel uncertain, then? Well, of course not; the gospel in itself was certain and sure. What Paul had to do was to confirm that gospel publicly by word of mouth before Nero, so that the gospel would be known without any uncertainty.

We are thus to confirm our election: to make it known, to make it evident, so that none may stand in any doubt as to whether we are elect or not, because they can see the evidence that we are elect.

11. Are there degrees of entry into the kingdom?

For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. (2 Pet 1:11)

We will make our calling and election sure if we do the things which he has told us to do in the earlier part of the chapter, namely, in the power of faith, to add the Christian virtues to our character:

Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. (vv. 5–7)

Now, what we need at once to notice is that what is at stake is not whether the believer eventually enters that eternal kingdom or not; but whether he simply *enters* it, or is given an *abundant, rich entry* into that kingdom.

The adverb in Greek receives the prominent emphasis in the sentence, 'For in this way there will be *richly* provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.' I should like to dwell upon the importance of this verse, particularly because, since I am arguing for the eternal security of a believer, there may be some who will imagine that I am encouraging believers thereby to live carelessly—I am doing nothing of the sort.

Here we see that something exceedingly important depends on our cooperating with God; on our using the divine power that he has granted to us in order to cultivate and develop our Christian character. It will mean all the difference between just getting into the kingdom, and having that entrance ministered to us richly.

But now someone is sure to say, 'What does it mean to have "the entrance ministered to you richly" or not richly—are there degrees of entry into the coming kingdom?'

Yes, there are degrees of entry, but we should not think of the matter in a local, geographical way. It is not a question of either getting into heaven just by the door and sitting in some ghastly place by the entrance, or else being taken right into heaven and being given a front seat. But rather, it is to be understood in the sense of *our enjoyment of eternity*.

A simple illustration

Imagine, if you can, a Christmas party, and at that Christmas party there is a young baby of eleven months old, a boy of eight years old, a girl of seventeen and a father and a mother. Now, they are all at the party. They have all had an entrance to the party ministered to them, and, indeed, they all enjoy the party to the maximum of their ability.

But then, of course, they do not all enjoy the party equally. Some are, so to speak, more at the party than others. The little baby of eleven months old enjoys the party. He sits in his high chair with a big spoon, which he then dips into the cream and bangs it on his high chair and thinks it is a marvellous experience, and at half past five he goes to bed quite content. He has been at the party.

The boy of eight years old is not banging a spoonful of cream on his high chair, he is on the floor playing trains with his father. But, of course, the little boy of eleven months old in the chair, even though he sees his brother playing trains, has not the slightest idea of what his brother is doing, and isn't really interested anyway.

On the other hand, the girl of seventeen, she isn't sitting on the floor playing trains with her eight-year-old brother. She has grown up far beyond that; she is dressed in her very best party dress and has eyes for all sorts of special opportunities that come up at parties when you have guests present.

Now, as I say, they are all at the party, but the girl of seventeen is entering into the party far more than the little baby of eleven months old. Her extra enjoyment, her more abundant entrance, depends on the fact that she has in fact grown up and developed her possibilities for enjoying adult things.

Levels of enjoyment of the eternal kingdom

So will it be in the eternal kingdom. Every believer will enter that kingdom because entry is secured by the blood of Christ.

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. (Rev 22:14)

But while all believers will be in, some believers will enjoy heaven much more than others. That is because here on earth they listened to Peter's exhortation and, by the power of God, have grown spiritually. They added to their spiritual character the things that Peter indicated, thereby developing their potential for enjoying heaven. We ought to notice that the difference between these two types of believers is eternal. Therefore, it is an exceedingly important and serious matter that, as Christians, as believers, here in this life, we give all diligence to add Christian virtues and qualities and potential to our character.

But having said that, I emphasise once more that what Peter is exhorting us to do is not to make sure that we get in, as distinct from not getting in at all. He is talking to believers and

therefore he is exhorting them not to be content just to enter in, but so to live here that the entrance ministered to them may be abundant.

12. Will God complete the work which he has begun in us?

Now there is another way, again, that we may approach this whole topic, and that is to consider the involvement in our salvation of the character of God. We are told, for instance, by Paul in this letter to the Philippians, of his confidence for the believers at Philippi. Says he,

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (1:6).

Paul's confidence, you notice, is not based upon the perseverance of the believers in Philippi, it is based on the character of God; that the work which God has begun in them, God will complete in them.

And a similar assurance is given by Paul to the believers at Corinth. As we know from this letter, at the time he wrote it many of those believers were living in a very low spiritual state, and that was most unfortunate. But he said to them, 'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (1 Cor 1:9). And, because God is faithful, Paul was able to state categorically, '[God] will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ' (v. 8).

Once more, Paul's confidence is based upon the character of God. God is faithful, and because he is faithful he has not only called these people, not only gifted them, so that they are 'not lacking in any spiritual gift, as they wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ' (v. 7)—Paul is able to affirm that God will sustain them to the end, guiltless in that day.

And now I must answer some of the other questions listed for me

Question 1

The first of these questions is based on Luke 9:62: 'Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."' And I suppose you are taking that to mean, if a man puts his hand to the plough (to confess his faith in the Lord Jesus) and then looks back (turns back and rejects the faith), he is not fit for the kingdom of God and will not get into heaven at last.

But let me first point out to you what exactly the word means that is translated in our English translation *fit* for the kingdom of God. The word literally means 'well set': set in a good angle or in a good fashion. Our Lord Jesus is, after all, using a metaphor—the metaphor of the ploughman with his plough.

Now, if a farmer is going to plough a field and his plough is at the beginning of a furrow, he puts his hand to the plough and starts to plough across the field. Then he must keep his eye on the other side of the field to which he is moving. If he constantly keeps turning round to look in the direction from which he has come, his plough, though continuing to move across the field to the other side, will begin to wander in all sorts of directions and not cut a straight furrow. A man who puts his hand to the plough and begins to plough across a field, but looks

back, is not 'well set'. He is in an awkward position that will be make his ploughing very crooked.

Our Lord was using this illustration to a man who, when our Lord said to him, 'Follow me', replied, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father' (vv. 59–61). And our Lord is insistent that, in order to be good followers of his, we are not allowed to put anything first before him. If we try to follow him, and yet all the while are putting other things first, then we are like a man who is trying to plough across a field but is continually looking back in the direction from which he came. Our Christian lives, instead of making straight for the goal, will wander and become crooked.

But that is saying nothing about our eternal salvation, it is talking about the quality of the furrow that we shall plough throughout our Christian lives.

Question 2

The next question you asked me is based on John 5:14, where our Lord says to the man whom he had recently healed, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.' What did our Lord mean by the phrase, 'that nothing worse may happen to you'? Worse than what?

If we take it in its context, I submit to you that it can only mean, worse than the thing from which he had been suffering all those thirty-eight years. He had been suffering from a physical disease and that is why he was lying at the pool of Bethesda. Our Lord had healed him from that physical disease, but warned him that he should no longer continue to sin so that nothing worse may happen to him—that is, a worse illness than the illness that he had suffered hitherto. It may well be that his first illness had been brought on by sin of some kind. While he was delivered from the consequences, he must be careful lest he repeats the sin and finds himself back in worse trouble.

Question 3

The next question you asked me is based on the Epistle to the Galatians 6:9, 'Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.' According to the details of the question that I have before me, what you are interested in is this idea of eternal life being *reaped*.

I suspect that it may have suggested to you the fact that eternal life has to be reaped, that it is not in our present possession, and that we cannot be certain of possessing it until finally we reap it in heaven at last.

But that cannot be so, because our Lord himself and the Apostle John, in many places, tell us, 'He that believes in the Son of God has,' that is, *already has*, 'eternal life' (for example, John 3:36). The reason why, in fact, Paul can talk about reaping eternal life in the future is because eternal life is a *life*. Eternal life is not a thing like a lump of gold that, once you have received it, you can put it into a bank and say, 'Well, I don't need it now, I will leave it in the bank until some future occasion when I do need it and then I will take it out.'

Eternal life is a life. It has all sorts of potential. But having eternal life is one thing, and developing its potential is another.

We may take the analogy of physical life. All living people have physical life, but they do not all develop the potentials that are inherent in their physical life. One may go on by diligent

use of time and practice to become a world famous athlete; the rest of us cannot be bothered to exercise ourselves even as we should and, therefore, our muscles become flabby. But we still have physical life.

And so Paul here is talking to the believers that, if they are to sow to the Spirit here and now in this life—not merely in the next—they shall reap all the blessings that come from the diligent development of the potential of our eternal life.

If, of course, a believer neglects to sow to the Spirit and, on the contrary, sows to the flesh, he will, says Paul, 'from the flesh reap corruption' (v. 8). And that would be perfectly true. If we grow careless in our Christian living, and spend our time and energies on fleshly and unclean things, we shall find that we reap a great deal of trouble and sorrow and heartbreak in this life.

But we have already seen from 1 Corinthians 3 that the man who does that kind of thing, and builds on the foundation with wood, hay and straw, shall lose his reward. He shall suffer loss, indeed eternal loss, but he himself shall be saved—his eternal security is not in doubt. Question 4Next you have called my attention to a passage in 1 Timothy 3:1–6, which gives us the qualifications that a bishop (or overseer, or elder in a church) must possess, if he is to be allowed to undertake that work.

In particular, you've called my attention to verse 6 where it is said that an aspiring bishop, 'must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.'

Now, what does that mean? Well, it is the fact that the devil has no power to condemn anyone. Therefore, we must understand it that, if he is not careful, this man, being puffed up, shall fall into the same condemnation as the devil. I take that to mean that he will act in the same way as the devil acts. That is to say, the devil was puffed up with pride.

If we are to understand those colourful passages in the Prophets that describe the king of Babylon and the king of Tyre (see Ezek 28) in such exalted language that many have proposed that behind those earthly kings there stood the personage of Satan himself, then we may deduce that Satan's great sin was that he was puffed up with pride and, in consequence, fell from that high office.

I take it that Paul is saying the same about this novice. The great temptation to him of high office in the church would be that he would not have the maturity to carry it with all due humility. He would be puffed up with pride, as the devil was puffed up with pride, and therefore fall into sin and be rendered unfit for his office.

It cannot mean that a believer, having fallen into pride and therefore being no longer fit to undertake that office, would, by that same token, be cast eventually into the lake of fire.

Peter himself, who became an apostle, a 'great shepherd of the sheep', an example elder to all the rest of us, fell early on, as we have already seen. He fell, not by pride, but by cowardice, and went so far as to deny the Lord. But Peter wasn't on that account cast away, rejected by the Saviour and eventually cast into the lake of fire. In spite of his fall and his denial of the Lord, he never lost his faith because our Lord had prayed that he should not lose his faith. He was eventually restored, not only to bold confession of Christ, but restored to his office.

And, therefore, I take it that this passage in 1 Timothy 3 has nothing really to do with the question of eternal security.

Question 5

Now, let us look at Revelation 3:5, for this is another Scripture to which you have called my attention and on which you have invited my comment. It reads like this:

He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. (KJV)

It is our Lord speaking, and he is addressing the church in Sardis. People therefore argue that, when our Lord promises, 'I will never blot his name out of the book of life', we are to deduce that it is possible for a believer to have his name blotted out of the book of life. It is only if a believer is steadfast and faithful to the end that Christ promises his name will not be blotted out. But a believer who does not *overcome* will have his name blotted out of the book.

But first of all we must ask ourselves a prior question that is fundamental to the exegesis of the passage. When our Lord says, 'He who overcomes', what does he mean by the term 'overcomes'?

We may get a straight and clear answer to that question if we look at 1 John 5:4-5:

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Here we are told exactly who the overcomer is: 'Who is it that overcomes the world?'—'the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.' *The believer is the overcomer.* We may confirm that by looking at Revelation 21:7-8:

The one who conquers [overcomes] will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.

You will notice from these verses that there are only two groups. There is the group made up of the ones who overcome: they are sons of God. Then there is the other large group that suffers the penalty of eternal perdition in the lake of fire. There is not a third group: a person who is a believer but somehow does not manage to overcome. You are either an overcomer, that is, a believer, or you are not an overcomer, because you are not a believer.

But someone will say, 'But isn't it possible for a man to be a believer at the start and thus to be an overcomer, and then subsequently to fail to overcome, to be defeated, and therefore cease to be a believer?'

To answer that we must turn back to 1 John 5:4, which begins like this: 'For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world.' This is a positive, clear, categorical statement. The one that is born of God *does* overcome the world. If a person is not an overcomer, it is

because he or she has not been born of God; but if a person has been born again, has been born of God, he or she does overcome the world.

This is a categorical statement and I do not see any way of getting around it: no way of arguing that what is born of God sometimes overcomes the world, but sometimes does not.

So, our Lord is saying that the one who overcomes, that is, the true believer—the one that is ‘born of God’—may know it as a certainty that his or her name is in the book of life and will never be blotted out.

But you will perhaps say, ‘The very fact that our Lord promises some that their names *will not* be blotted out of the book of life must imply that some *will* have their names blotted out of the book of life.’

But that is not necessarily true. Our Lord is here encouraging the believer, encouraging the overcomer, with the fact of his eternal security, that his name will never be blotted out. That is what our Lord does in less picturesque language elsewhere:

Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life. (John 5:24)

In other words, he will never come into condemnation; his name will never be blotted out of the book. But it would not be fair to imply by that, that some will have their names blotted out of the book. If the believer is eternally secure, because his name is not only written in the book, but will never be blotted out of the book, you must then ask, ‘How does a person get his or her name written into the book, for, unless a person’s name is written into the book, the name cannot be blotted out of the book?’

If it is the fact that the only way to get your name written in the book is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, then, once the name is written in, Christ assures you it will never be blotted out. There is no comfort here, on the other hand, for the unbeliever, for his name is not in the book. Therefore, of course, it will never be blotted out, because it never was in. Whereas, the name of the believer is written in, with the assurance that it will never be blotted out.

I want now to make some final remarks of my own. I think I have answered all the questions given to me. Doubtless there are many other Scriptures that people who do not believe in the eternal security of the believer might wish to adduce against me.

13. What does it mean, to ‘fall from grace’?

There is the famous one, for instance, in Galatians 5:4, where Paul speaks of some who have ‘fallen away from grace’. And on the basis of that little phrase there are many who say, ‘There you are, it is possible for a believer to fall from grace and then be lost.’

But when we look at that passage, it is clear that Paul means no such thing. Falling from grace is not falling into some sin, some strife, some misdemeanour. Falling from grace is what they do, who have professed to believe on the Lord Jesus, who have professed that they believe that salvation is by faith, by grace, plus nothing else—who then go on to insist that some ceremony of the law is necessary in order to be saved.

I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (Gal 5:2-4)

That is to say, you cannot mix the two principles of salvation. Either you accept salvation altogether by grace through faith, plus nothing, or you try to work out your salvation by keeping the works of the law, circumcision, or some other such thing. But you cannot mix the two principles.

Therefore, if you find a man who professes that he is saved by grace, but then you find that he demands that some work of the law be added in order to be sure of his salvation, then you may be sure in your heart of hearts that that man is either an ignorant believer, who doesn't know what he is doing, or else he is not a believer at all.

What we mean by *a believer in the Lord Jesus* is a person who has faith in the Lord Jesus for salvation—and faith means *faith*, not *works*.

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (Rom 3:27-28)

Faith is a principle, but in this context it excludes works. You cannot mix the two. You cannot have faith in the Lord Jesus for salvation and, at the same time, base your salvation on some works of the law.

That is what makes me worried, if I may say so, when I find people who profess to be saved through faith in Christ, who nevertheless insist on having their babies baptised because they feel that somehow that baptism does contribute something to the baby's salvation. And, therefore, they are afraid not to have the baby baptised, lest if the baby weren't baptised and then it died it wouldn't go to heaven. They are showing by this action that they think infant baptism somehow contributes to our salvation. But if they put their faith in such a ceremony for salvation, then they are precisely the kind of people that Paul is talking about here. They can't have it both ways. Either they are depending on this ceremony of works of the law, or they are depending solely on faith in Christ, but they cannot mix the two. They must decide whether to be believers in Christ, or whether to depend on the ceremonies and works of the law.

But a true believer, by definition, does not depend on the works of the law and, therefore, does not fall from grace.

14. What if I don't have the 'right kind' of faith?

While we're talking about *faith*, let me just add another thing. I have met many people in life who are true believers, but at some stage or other go through a difficult period. Perhaps it is that Satan puts doubts into their minds. Perhaps, for instance, they have fallen into some sin and then Satan whispered in their ear, 'Now look, you have sinned, therefore you can't call yourself a Christian any more.' And these people get worried.

And then they wonder, 'Is my faith the right kind of faith? When I first trusted the Saviour, did I trust him the right way round? Was it the *proper* kind of faith or was my faith not strong enough?'

And so, therefore, they become very worried while they try to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ with the right kind of faith. And I have heard of people who have put themselves through endless tortures, day after day, trying to commit themselves to the Saviour, trying to perform the act of faith, and never arriving at certainty that they have believed in the right way, or with the right amount, or the right strength.

Their sufferings are very real, although, on hearing about them, you might be disposed to smile. What these folks are doing, of course, is making an elementary mistake about the nature of faith. *They are regarding faith itself as a work* that they have to perform one hundred per cent correctly, one hundred per cent fully, or, if they don't, they are disqualified from salvation. They imagine their faith as a work, but if they only 'do the faith' fifty per cent well, and it is mixed with a certain amount of doubt, then, of course, it disqualifies them. Only if they reach one hundred per cent perfection in their faith can they be thought to qualify for salvation.

That, of course, is to turn faith into a meritorious deed, upon the merit of which depends a person's salvation. But the faith that we require for salvation is not a merit at all. If it were a merit it would be a work and, once more, salvation would be of works.

'Faith,' as many have said, 'is the empty hand that one stretches out towards God for him to place therein his free gift of salvation.' Faith does not earn or merit salvation, it just takes it. And, therefore, the man who came to Christ and said, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief' was immediately granted the gift that he sought (Mark 9:24).

15. What about faith and works?

Finally, let me remind us all that, though salvation is by faith and without works, salvation, being a real thing, will lead to works. And, therefore, where a person has genuinely believed the Saviour and has received salvation, we, who cannot see his faith, may, nevertheless, come to see that that faith is genuine by the works that the person does in the power of his or her salvation.

If I see you in your car on the road, I cannot see with my eyes that you have petrol in your tank. But if I see you speeding down the road at sixty miles an hour, I know you've got petrol in your tank because your car is moving and the engine is running. Now, of course, you don't make the petrol come into the tank by running the engine; petrol has to be got in by another fashion altogether. But if there is petrol in the tank then, all things being equal, the engine will run. If, therefore, a man says, 'I have petrol in my tank, but my car doesn't go, can't go and never goes, and it is not some mechanical fault with the engine,' then I have every reason to doubt whether he has got petrol in the car at all. For, if he had petrol in the car, normally the engine will run.

And so it is with salvation. We get salvation, not by works, but by faith. But when we have received salvation, the salvation leads to the works. If, therefore, a man professes to have salvation, but there are no works whatever in his life to give evidence that he does possess salvation, I then may well doubt whether the man is a believer at all.

To come back to my analogy: a man may have had petrol in his car but at times, nevertheless, the car may stop because the plugs have fouled up or there is some other thing wrong with the engine. Therefore, even though he has petrol, the engine won't run. I should be wrong to conclude that he has no petrol, just because, for the time being, his engine has stopped and won't run.

16. How about temporary lapses in faith?

Similarly, it is with the believer in the Lord Jesus. I recur to the example of Peter once more. Peter was a believer in the Lord Jesus, but there came a time when his 'engine' broke down. We have already seen that he maintained his faith. Deep within him, his faith never failed, but his engine stalled, so to speak, and, instead of confessing the Lord, he denied the Lord.

Now, if we had been standing in the high priest's court when Peter denied the Lord, we might well have come to the conclusion that he was not a believer, or that somehow he had lost his faith. And we should have said, 'Well, as he himself protested, "I am not a believer, I do not know Jesus Christ, I deny him"', we must accept what he says and, therefore, conclude that he is not a believer.'

But please observe that we would have been wrong in our conclusion. This phase in Peter's life was only temporary. He was at that moment denying Christ with his lips, but in his heart, as our Lord Jesus informed us, his faith remained. His faith did not fail, and while, for the moment, the outward evidence of Peter's life and lips was contradictory and conflicting, that temporary phase passed and the man turned round again and proved his faith genuine by his confession of the Lord.

That warns us to be very careful in our assessment of people. We should please remember that, while one can never have contradictory *proof*, one can often have contradictory *evidence*. Our works as believers are required as evidence. Not only do our fellow men and fellow Christians require our works as evidence, but God himself requires works as evidence: he requires us to justify our faith by our works.

But while that is so, our works are not the final proof. Our works are the evidence of faith, and sometimes the evidence can be contradictory. We cannot see the heart, of course; only God can see the heart. We must leave with him the final verdict as to whether any man or woman is a believer or not.

And with that, I leave the topic. I hope something of what I have been able to say has been a help to you and at least caused you to think. And now may God bless us all, and bless us whether we believe in eternal security, or still are convinced that a believer may fall away and be lost. God bless us nonetheless.

Let's be clear. Despite whatever doubts a true believer may have, thank God doubts cannot undo our salvation. And God give us grace, when all is said and done, so to believe that we are not only sure of our own security, but are concerned by the great mass of people around us who are not yet saved. May God help us to bring to them the wonderful security that there is in Christ.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.